

# The Hollow of Her Hand

by George Barr McCutcheon

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## SYNOPSIS.

Challis Wrاندall is found murdered in a rooming house near New York. Mrs. Wrاندall is summoned from the city and identifies the body. A young woman who accompanied Wrاندall to the inn and subsequently disappeared, is suspected. Mrs. Wrاندall starts back for New York in an auto during a blinding snow storm. On the way she meets a young woman in the road who proves to be the woman who killed Wrاندall. Feeling that the girl had done her service in ridding her of the man who though she loved him deeply, had caused her great sorrow, Mrs. Wrاندall determines to shield her and takes her to her own home. Mrs. Wrاندall hears the story of Hetty Castleton's life, except that portion that relates to Wrاندall. This and the story of the tragedy she forbids the girl ever to tell. She offers Hetty a home, friendship and security from peril on account of the tragedy. Sara Wrاندall and Hetty return to New York after an absence of a year in Europe. Leslie Wrاندall, brother of Challis, becomes greatly interested in Hetty. Sara sees in Leslie's infatuation possibility for revenge on the Wrاندalls and reparation for the wrongs she suffered at the hands of Challis Wrاندall by marrying his murderer into the family. Leslie, in company with his friend Brandon Booth, an artist, visits Sara at her country place. Leslie confesses to Sara that he is madly in love with Hetty. Sara arranges with Booth to paint a picture of Hetty. Booth has a haunting feeling that he has seen her before. Looking through a portfolio of pictures by an unknown English artist he finds one of Hetty. He speaks to her about it. Hetty declares it must be a picture of Hetty Glynn, an English actress, who resembles her very much. Much to his chagrin, Leslie is refused by Hetty. Booth and Hetty confess their love for each other, but the latter declares that she can never marry as there is an insurmountable barrier in the way. Hetty admits to Sara that she loves Leslie. Leslie declares that Hetty must marry Leslie, who must be made to pay his brother's debt to the girl. Hetty agrees to let Sara tell the real story of the tragedy and Sara threatens to strangle her if she says a word. Sara imitates Hetty by threatening to tell all this time she has believed Hetty to have "died" in her relations with Challis Wrاندall. Later she realizes that Hetty is in her heart. Hetty again proposes to Hetty. She is rejected. Hetty prepares to leave. She declares that after what has happened she can remain no longer. Hetty starts for Europe. At sea she receives a message from Booth that he has started on a faster steamer and will be waiting for her on the other side. Booth meets her and accompanies her to London.

## CHAPTER XIV.—Continued.

When the night boat from Dover to Calais slipped away from her moorings that evening, Hetty Castleton and her maid were on board, with all their bags and trunks, and Brandon Booth was supposed to be completely at sea in the heart of that glittering London town.

The night was fog-laden and dripping, and the crossing promised to be unpleasant. Wrapped in a thick easterly Hetty sat huddled up in the lee of the deckhouse, sick at heart and miserable. She reproached herself for the scurvy trick she was playing on him, reviled herself and yet pitied herself.

A tall man came shambling down the narrow space along the rail and stopped directly in front of her. She started in alarm as he reached out his hand to support himself against the deckhouse. As he leaned forward, he laughed.

"You were thinking of me, Hetty," said the man.

For a long time she stared at him, transfixed, and then, with a low moan, covered her eyes with her hands.

"Is it true—is it a dream?" she sobbed.

He dropped down beside her and gathered her in his strong, eager arms.

"You were thinking of me, weren't you? And reproaching yourself, and blaming yourself for running away like I thought so. Well, you might as well try to dodge the smart-detective in the world as to give the slip now, darling."

"You—you spied on me?" she cried, muffled tones. She lay very limp in his arms.

"I did," he confessed, without shame. "Gad, when I think of what I might be doing at this moment if I hadn't found you out in time! Think of me back there in London, racing about like a madman, searching for you in every—"

"Please, please!" she implored.

"But luck was with me. You can't get away, Hetty. I shan't let you out of my sight again. I'll camp in front of your door and you'll see me wither and die of sleeplessness, for one or the other of my eyes will always be open."

"Oh, I am so tired, so miserable," she murmured.

"Poor little sweetheart!"

"I wish you would hate me."

"Lie where you are, dearest, and—forget!"

"If I only could—forget!"

"Rest. I will hold you tight and keep you warm. We're in for a nasty crossing, but it is paradise for me. I am mad with the delight of having you here, holding you close to me, feeling you in my arms. The wilder the night the better. Or I am wild with the joy of it all. I love you! I love you! I love you!"

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and oh, I shall always believe in fairies."

A long time afterward the throbbing ceased, bell-buoys whistled and clanged about them; the sea suddenly grew calm and lifeless; they slid over it as if it were a quivering sheet of ice; and lights sneaked out of the fog and approached with stealthy swiftness. Bells rang below and above them, sailors sprang up from everywhere and calls were heard below; the rattling of chains and the thumping of heavy luggage took the place of that steady, monotonous beat of the engines. People began to infest the deck, limp and groaning, harassed but voiceless. A mighty sigh seemed to envelop the whole ship—a sigh of relief.

Then it was that these two arose stiffly from their sheltered bench and gave heed to the things that were about them.

The channel was behind them.

## CHAPTER XV.

### Rattling Old Bones.

They journeyed to Paris by the night mail. He was waiting for her on the platform when she descended from the wagon lit in the Gare du Nord. Sleepy passengers crowded with them into the customs department. She, alone among them all, was smiling brightly, as if the world could be sweet at an hour when, by all odds, it should be sleepless.

"I was up and on the lookout for you at Amiens," he declared, as they walked off together. "You might have got off there, you know," with a wry grin.

"I shall not run away from you again, Brandon," she said earnestly. "I promise, on my honor."

"By Jove," he cried, "that's a relief!" Then he broke into a happy laugh.

"I shall go to the Ritz," she said, after her effects had been examined and were ready for release.

"I thought so," he announced calmly. "I wired for rooms before I left London."

"Really, this is ridiculous," he pleaded.

As they rattled and bounced over the cobblestones in a taxi-meter on the way to the Place Vendôme, he devoted the whole of his conversation to the delicious breakfast they were to have, expatiating glibly on the wonderful berries that would come first in that always-to-be-remembered meal.

She was ravenously hungry by the time they reached the hotel, just from listening to his dissertation on chops and rolls and coffee as they are served in Paris, to say nothing of waffles and honey and the marmalade that no Englishman can do without.

Alone in his room, however, he was quite another person. His calm assurance took flight the instant he closed the door and moodily began to prepare for his bath. Resolution was undiminished, but the facts in the case were most desolating. Whatever it was that stood between them, there was no gainsaying its power to influence their lives. It was no trifle that caused her to take this second flight, and the sooner he came to realize the seriousness of opposition the better.

He made up his mind on one point in that half-hour before breakfast; if she asked him again to let her go her way in peace, it was only fair to her and right that he should submit to the inevitable. She loved him, he was sure of it. Then there must be a very good reason for her perplexing attitude toward him. He would make one more attempt to have the truth from her. Failing in that, he would accept the situation as hopeless, for the time being at least. She should know that he loved her deeply enough for that.

She joined him in the little open-air cafe, and they sat down at a table in a remote corner. There were few people breakfasting. In her tender blue eyes there was a look of sadness that haunted him, even as she smiled and called him beloved.

"Hetty, darling," he said, leaning forward and laying his hand on hers, "can't you tell me what it is?"

She was prepared for the question. In her heart she knew the time had come when she must be fair with him. He observed the pallor that stole into her warm, smooth cheeks as she regarded him fixedly for a long time before replying.

"There is only one person in the world who can tell you, Brandon. It is for her to decide. I mean Sara Wrاندall."

He felt a queer, sickening sensation of uneasiness sneak into existence. In the back of his mind, a hateful fear began to shape itself. For a long time he looked into her somber eyes, and as he looked the fear that was hateful took on something of a definite shape.

"Did you know her husband?" he asked, and somehow he knew what the answer would be.

"Yes," she replied, after a moment. She was startled. Her lips remained parted.

He watched her closely. "Has this secret anything to do with Challis Wrاندall?"

"It has," said she, meeting his gaze steadily.

His hands clutched the edge of the table in a grip that turned the knuckles white.

"Hetty!" he cried, in a hoarse whisper. "You—can't mean that you—"

"You must go to Sara," she cried hurriedly. "Haven't I told you that she is the one?"

"Where you in love with that infernal scoundrel?" he demanded fiercely.

"Sara knows everything. She will tell you."

"Are you carrying on an affair with him while pretending to be the wife of a man who—"

"Tell me that! Did you—"

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can tell you no more. Why do you glare at me as if I were the meanest thing on earth? Is this love? Is this your idea of greatness? Isn't it enough for you to know that Sara is my loyal, devoted friend; that she—"

"Wait!" he commanded darkly. "Is it possible that she did not discover your secret until the day you left her house so abruptly? Does that explain your sudden departure?"

"I can answer that," she said quietly. "She has known everything from the day I met her. I have not said anything, Brandon, to lead you to believe that I was in love with Challis Wrاندall, have I?"

His eyes softened. "No, you haven't. I hope you will forget what I said. You see, I knew Wrاندall's reputation. He had no sense of honor. He—"

"Well, I have!" she said levelly.

He flushed. "I am a beast! I'll put it in this way, then: Was he in love with you?"

"You are still unfair. I shall not answer."

He was silent for a long time. "And Sara's lips are sealed," he mused, still possessed of doubts and fears.

"Until she elects to tell the story, dearest love, my lips are also sealed. I love you better than anything else in all this world. I could willingly offer up my life for you, but—well, my life does not belong to me. It is Sara's."

"For heaven's sake, Hetty, what is all this?" he cried in desperation.

"I can say no more. It is useless to insist, Brandon. If you can wrest the story from her, all well and good. You will hate me then, dear love. But it cannot be helped. I am prepared."

"Tell me this much: When you refused to marry Leslie, was your course inspired by what had happened in—in connection with Challis Wrاندall?"

"You forget that it is you that I love," she responded simply.

"But why should Sara urge you to marry Leslie if there is anything—"

"Hush! There is the waiter. Come to my sitting-room after breakfast. I have something to say to you. We must come to a definite understanding. This cannot go on."

He was with her for an hour in that pinched little sitting-room, and left her there without a vestige of rancor in his soul. She would not give an inch in the stand she had taken, but something immeasurably great in his make-up rose to the occasion and he went forth with the conviction that he had no right to demand more of her than she was ready to give. He was satisfied to abide by her decision. The spell of her was over him more completely than ever before.

Two days later he saw her off at the Gare de Lyons, bound for Interlaken. There was a complete understanding between them. She wanted to be quite alone in the Alpine town; he was not to follow her there. She had reserved rooms at the Schweizerhof, and the windows of her sitting-room looked straight up the valley to the snow-covered crest of the Jungfrau. She remembered these rooms; as a young girl she had occupied them with her father and mother. By some hook or crook, Booth arranged by wire for her to have them again, not an easy matter at that season of the year. Later she was to go to Lucerne, and then to Venice.

The slightest shred of hope was left for Booth. Even though he might accomplish the task he had set unto himself—the conquest of Sara in respect to the untold story—he still had Hetty's dismal prophecy that after he learned the truth he would come to see why they could not be married. But he would not despair.

"We'll see," was all that he said in response to her forlorn cry that they were parting for ever. There was a

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grinness in the way he said it that gave her something to cherish during the months to come; the hope that he would come back and take her in spite of herself.

He sailed from Cherbourg on the first steamship calling there. Awake, he thought of her; asleep, he dreamed of Challis Wrاندall. There was something uncanny in the persistence with which that ruthless despoiler of peace forced his way into his dreams, to the absolute exclusion of all else. The voyage home was made horrid by these nightly reminders of a man he scarcely knew, yet dreaded. He became more or less obsessed by the idea that an evil spell had descended upon him in the shape of a ghastly influence.

The weeks passed slowly for Hetty. There were no letters from Sara, but an occasional line or so from Mr. Carroll. She had made Brandon Booth promise that he would not write to her, nor was he to expect anything from her. If her intention was to cut herself off entirely from her recent

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